

The role of police in monitoring rural conflict, with a focus on public order

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Abstract

The policing of public dissent in rural and regional areas is influenced by many factors, including global and state events but also by the dynamics of the localised context of police and activist interaction. This article asserts the importance of dialogue and negotiated management between police and demonstrators in order to facilitate peaceful protest in regional and rural areas. It explores policing approaches of dealing with industrial disputes in regional areas as well as environmental climate change protest. Rural and regional police face the challenges of broad geographical expanses, isolation, fewer resources, limited back-up and equipment, and more distant communication with senior officers than their urban counterparts generally experience in public order situations. The success of dialogue policing and negotiated management of public order is tested in the current era when police are becoming more heavily armed not just in urban but also in regional and rural locations. Rural and regional police are often immersed in tightly-knit local communities and follow a community policing ethos but they are also entrusted to maintain law and order.

Key words: police; rural policing; public order policing; industrial disputes; environmental protest; Australia



Introduction

From the Roman poetic era of Virgil's *Bucolics* and *The Aeneid*, Western literature and history have been embellished with charming thoughts and pictures of tranquil rural landscapes. Convicts transported to early New South Wales in Australia were deployed 'up-bush' to reform body and soul through physical labour in the vice-free rustic unknown. Donnermeyer (2007) argues that 'the science of criminology' has ignored rural crime.¹ Even contemporaneously, there has been an obsession with urban crime with a subsequent neglect of rural, regional and remote (RRR) crime (see Smith & Byrne, 2018; Harkness, Harris & Baker, 2016). The myth of bucolic bliss, the mystical crime-free rurality, is shown to be misleading, inaccurate and even dangerous. Hogg and Carrington (2006, p. 9) have debunked the mythical assumptions that rural communities are orderly and cohesive by nature and that modern crime and violence are primarily an urban phenomena.

In the nineteenth century, professional police forces around the Western world were created in response to rapidly expanding industrialisation and urbanisation with the accompanying rise of street crimes. Their bureaucratic power structures quickly evolved in centralised urban areas (London, Boston, Paris, Sydney). Subsequently, RRR policing has often been ignored by criminologists, historians and geographers (Mawby & Yarwood, 2011). This is particularly true of RRR policing of dissent and unrest in Australia. Research into rural crime, and its policing, is a relatively modern development. As is now well documented and forcefully argued, rural crime, conflict and protest are not new phenomena but steeped in history as well as the modern era. Regional and remote conflicts and battles between colonial state police and Indigenous groups all too often occasioned bloody encounters, with Mounted Police and Border Police conducting punitive expeditions, at times official massacres in remote areas (Sturma, 1987).² However, much police activity in colonial times focused on a high number of urban arrests to the relative neglect of rural offences, partly due to the centralised structure of the state police forces (although the Kelly saga in north-east Victoria was a notable colonial exception) (Haldane, 2017). The edited book, *Locating Crime in Context and Place* (Harkness, Harris & Baker, 2016) rejects the bucolic idyll of rural Australia being devoid of crime and violence and it acknowledges the diversity of rural place, globalisation impact, rapidly evolving communication technologies, and changing groups and networks. Places over time are neither static nor homogeneous in terms of composition, structure and social control.

Rural policing is a specialised activity in itself. It is traditionally embodied within a community policing ethos with the local police station symbolic of stability and emergency assistance. The local police officer is mandated to solve crimes in the rural community but also keep the peace. These two goals have never been exclusive of the other, but the colonial paramilitary police posture, especially in Victoria with the influence of the Royal Irish Constabulary, adhered to the primacy of law enforcement (Haldane, 2017). Police remain the primary agency for identifying and interdicting rural crime and potentially violent conflict situations. Paradoxically rural police have been, and are, both the protectors and the prosecutors; a confused dichotomy of providing assistance and enforcing arrests. With the 'tooling up' of police in recent years and the advent of riot squad 'warrior cops' (Goldsworthy, 2018), it is an appropriate time to reflect to what extent dialogue and this community policing ethos still retain an important role in diffusing potential street conflict, in both rural and urban settings.

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Police traditionally have shown a strong aversion to the disruptiveness inherent in political protest activity and suppressed it accordingly (Vitale, 2007, p. 406). Historically, police forces, supported by governmental authority and the ruling power elites, have often assailed advocates of radical social change (peasant revolts, suffragettes, civil rights campaigners, anti-apartheid demonstrators, environmental activists, anti-globalisation protesters). In Australia, violent protest is not normally associated with rural communities but historically it occurred sporadically and passionately during industrial conflict and unemployment marches. The mines, the shearing-sheds and the wharves, not the cities, were the most common arena for bloody police-worker confrontation (Baker, 2005).

Historical policing of rural and regional industrial disputes

Rural life in the Australian colonies was often turbulent: the odious police licence hunts on the gold-fields, police harassment of the Irish in north-east Victoria in the late nineteenth century; police brutality against unemployed marchers during the 1890s depression (Haldane, 2017). Public order policing is not confined to urban boundaries; in fact, many of the vexatious, bitter and violent industrial disputes in Australia occurred in remote areas. Protesters of bygone eras were often union workers in pitched battle with the state's police at the shearing-sheds, the coal-mines and the regional wharves.

Historically, whenever police in Australia determined to intervene and respond to industrial or political dissent, they often did so in a repressive, aggressive and sometimes violent and brutal manner (Baker, 2005). During bitter industrial strife, owners and employers customarily relied on the apparatus of the state in the form of the police to make their plants accessible, to protect staff and strike-breakers, and to safeguard business productivity. As the coercive arm and guardian of the state, police traditionally quelled hostile industrial unrest in remote regions, thereby influencing the processes and even outcomes of some protracted disputes (for example, 1891 shearers strike; 1909 Broken Hill strike; 1919 Townsville meatworks strike; 1928 waterfront strikes; 1929-1930 northern New South Wales coalfields lockout; 1937 Koroomburra lockout; 1946 Pilbara strike; 1964-1965 Mt Isa strike) (see Blackmur, 1993, p. 206; Baker, 2005, pp. 50-81).

The following colonial examples illustrate the hazards of regional and rural police using force to confront a determined and organised local community opposed to strike-breaking labour.

During colonial times, an insufficient number of police in rural districts and the lack of reinforcements severely impeded police enforcement of the law. The Clunes riot of December 1873 exemplifies the potency of combined community action against the colonial constabulary (Small, 1997; Baker, 2001). After the manager of the Lothair Quartz and Alluvial Mining Company informed the miners that there would be no more contract work and that they would be required to work two extra shifts, 150 quartz miners went on strike for 14 weeks regarding pay and working conditions. The united and resolute rural township supported the strikers in their efforts to prevent Chinese strike-breaking labour, who were being escorted from Ballarat by a small band of mainly 'outside' police determined to enter the mining town (Baker, 2001).

On 9 December 1873, a small band of about fifteen police led 45 strike-breaking Chinese from Ballarat and Creswick towards Clunes. However, the miners were well-prepared! More than one thousand men, women and children, "armed with sticks and stones", waited on

the Ballarat Road for the arrival of the Chinese (*Creswick Advertiser*, 10 December 1873). Five coaches, escorted by police, approached “with a dash” the barricade, a mile short of Clunes. Foolhardy Sergeant Larnier (Ballarat) and Constable Durack (Clunes) both mounted the barricade, one with a carbine and the other with a horse-pistol (*Age*, 10 December 1873). Geographically, the one and only access road to Clunes meant that police could not circumvent the barricade. The police and Chinese were quickly routed. Tactically, Sergeant Larnier's foray reveals the hazards of a grossly outnumbered police body attempting to move a committed and incensed local crowd. The legal authority of fifteen police could not conquer a community of a thousand agitated miners and their families (Baker, 2001).

The judicial outcomes at Clunes reflected the local feelings: considering the nature of the assault charges, the penalties imposed on the guilty were light. Fines amounting to 80 pounds were paid by the Clunes Miners' Association and townspeople. There was no evidence of continued hostility towards local police in the Clunes district. The miners' spokesmen rebuked the police sortie, but the deep-seated antagonism was directed against the Lothair company's Melbourne directors (Baker, 2005, pp. 31-34).

Like Clunes, other rural mining communities spurned strike-breakers and their protectors. At Adamson, in the Hunter Valley in September 1888, thirty police were unable to protect six strike-breakers who fled from the stoning of a large crowd (Walker, 1986, pp. 56-7). Remote communities were prepared to support strikers in their battles, often by financial and emotional support, at times by physical presence and action. The Broken Hill lockout of 1908-1909 involved a massive escalation of police manpower and intervention in town affairs. ‘Outside’ police, housed in barracks, and ostracised non-unionists were vilified and attacked by local supporters of the locked-out unionists. The locals' food boycott of both the barricaded company officials and the ‘police expeditionary force’ proved effective. A scathing postcard from the 1909 lockout depicted avaricious and detested ‘outside’ police stealing food after shopkeepers had refused to serve them (University of Wollongong Archives, RAAM no.929, postcard 19).

The case studies

This article focuses on illustrative aspects of the policing of industrial conflict and regional protest that feature police-community dynamics. Public disorders covering a vast array of everyday policing of public space such as drunkenness, street violence, assaults, and tourist anti-social behaviour are not discussed here. The spotlight centres on the public order policing of collective unrest in regional and remote locations, especially the two diverse case-studies: the 1992 regional Burnie (Tasmania) industrial dispute and the 2009 climate camp against the Hazelwood power station in the Latrobe Valley region (Victoria).

The two case-studies merit a word of explanation in terms of selection and methodology. The regional industrial dispute, that raised many fundamentals of institutionalised workplace relations, threatened to divide the town of Burnie (Tasmania) as the local police attempted to maintain the peace. The other event occurred in a remote and thinly populated part of Gippsland, Victoria, in 2009; it embodied the unknown of the first climate camp protest in Australian history and it represented a unique public order challenge for local police. Both case-studies involved recorded interviews with key protagonists. In the case of Burnie, police, union officials, company managers, politicians and journalists were interviewed. Official industrial court documentation, national and local newspaper sources, news releases and relevant correspondence were significant for the research. For the

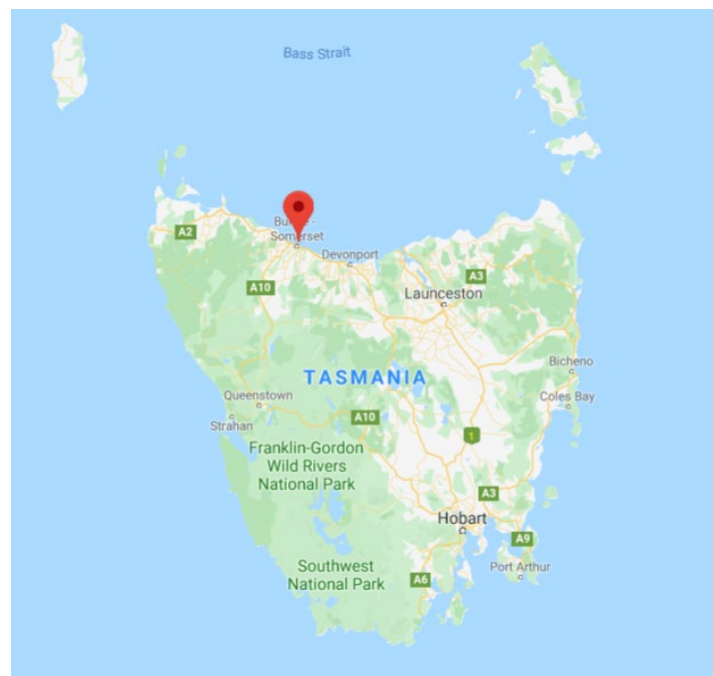
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Hazelwood study, recorded interviews were conducted with senior regional police officers and the environmental organisers.

APPM Burnie dispute

The 1992 Associated Pulp and Paper Mill (APPM) dispute at Burnie (refer to Figure 1) took the form of a classic industrial confrontation between the rights of workers to representation and the determination of the company to pursue its own restructuring agenda. This dispute offered a microcosm of 1990s industrial conflict, with large companies attempting to re-establish managerial prerogative through litigation and unions seeing the fight as one of survival. The APPM dispute illustrates how policing approaches have changed in the handling of regional industrial conflicts since the mounted and baton-charged police offensives in colonial times.

Figure 1: Map of the state of Tasmania identifying location of Burnie³



APPM dominated the industrial, provincial town of Burnie in 1992 and was the district's largest employer of 1,100 people. The three-month long dispute was divisive and protracted by Australian, and especially Tasmanian, standards. The aggressive mainland parent company, North Broken Hill-Peko, failed to appreciate the tightly knit and well-organised regional Burnie community. Pickets were established and surrounded the mill, covering all eleven entry points (Baker, 2005). Picket captains were carefully selected; a policy of non-violence was enshrined; agitators were moved on; hygiene and cleanliness were emphasised; and alcohol was banned. Burnie police expected the local picketers and their supporters to be a self-disciplined body, encouraging safety and order on the picket-lines around the plant. The police left the onus on the union officials to control their own people: "we set the ground rules of what they could and couldn't do ... but then as it started to build up it got a bit emotional on both sides" (Timmerman interview).

Burnie police employed dialogue, consultation and compromise rather than confrontation and coercion with the picketers. Essentially 'free' to determine local police

policy and priorities, local police inspector Roy Fox (1992a, p. 16) consistently saw his discretionary duty as foremost one of preserving the peace in the Burnie district. The Inspector publicly stated that his “intention was to intervene only when a transgression of State laws made it necessary” and regularly insisted when interviewed that he would utilise his ‘discretionary powers in all circumstances where needed’ (Fox, 1992a, p. 16). The strategy was low-key and non-confrontationalist with limited arrests and intervention: “I simply contained the situation. I didn’t solve the situation”. In the early days of the major picketing, he stressed his neutrality to the union leaders, “while at the same time *projecting a human image of policing in such disruptive times*” (Fox interview). The human face of policing was rarely the traditional posture of police at times of impassioned industrial conflicts. Fox maintained a co-operative liaison with the picketers and union leaders to the dispute’s end. He saw his handling of the Burnie pickets in accord with philosophical and evolutionary changes in policing over the century:

1930s concept of going in with boots and truncheons and arresting everybody is not done in modern day policing. ... We realise that part of our trust is to maintain a cordial relationship with the public, to keep the peace. ... In the old days you had the police force and them out there. Now we are a police service; we are part of the general populace out there (Fox interview).

The company, and a few local individuals, expected police to enforce the law but Inspector Fox’s reply was forthright and practical if unacceptable to the company: “We’re only a small force and I don’t like the thought ... of having to face a large crowd, many of whom might well be hostile, but apart from that it’s not good for the town” (Fox, 1992b, p. 1). Fox’s response was as much a moral as a legal one: police were the guardians of the general interest and peace of the town. For Fox, police authority was not based solely upon the law (especially when the law is uncertain) but also necessitated the consent of the people. As Roy Fox protested, picketing places police in a no-win situation and condemnation is expected from one side or the other: “Damned if I didn’t; damned if I did” (Fox interview).

At Burnie, police reticence to forcefully remove the picketers was a major obstacle to North Broken Hill-Peko proceeding with their reforms including the denial of union representation of APPM workers. By failing to break the picket, police were giving tacit support and pseudo-legitimacy to union rights to organise and maintain a 24-hour picket around the mill’s six-and-a-half kilometre perimeter. Tensions increased with a series of ugly incidents, allegations and counter-allegations of intimidation, and renewed company pressure on police to intercede (*R v Commissioner of Police ex parte NBH Ltd*, 29 May 1992, pp. 35-41, 47-53).

Decisively, on Saturday 23 May, APPM’s parent company, North Broken Hill-Peko and its APPM management, having lost patience with the picketers and the police, in a surprise and unprecedented move, served a writ of *mandamus* on the Tasmanian Police Commissioner, John Johnson, which thereby ordered a public official or body to perform a duty. APPM management claimed that police failed to protect public property, to provide truck access and to assist workers who wished to go about their normal, lawful daily business, even to the extent of crossing picket lines (*Age*, 25 May 1992). The writ confirmed APPM’s hard-line stance against negotiation and challenged police operational independence.

Although Justice Wright,⁴ on 3 June, refused the *mandamus* order sought by North Broken Hill and declined to make the order absolute, he clearly forewarned the Tasmania Police to act against the Burnie picketing. Any failure to do so would have likely eventuated in Wright upholding any further re-application by the company for the rule *nisi*. He endorsed the APPM

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argument that non-striking employees and other people on lawful business should have access to the plant. The Commissioner of Police's misconceived policy of not breaking picket lines was incorrect and 'cannot be supported', according to Justice Wright. Obstructionist, passive picketing was declared illegal. The most damning of the judge's criticisms was that the "police cannot allow mob rule to displace the rule of law" in part due to insufficient policing numbers. Wright explicitly stated that Fox was "clearly wrong" by suggesting that "police should not interfere in a situation which had its genesis in an industrial dispute". The judgement indicated that police discretion is not unfettered and a constable cannot ignore the commission of an offence (Wright, 1992). The dispute's direction had been taken out of the jurisdiction of local authorities, including the police.⁵

A police organisation being fundamentally a conservative agency of government rarely questions a direct legal ruling, especially one of the Supreme Court. After the Wright decision, police recognised that their discretionary power in the APPM dispute was greatly curtailed and they accepted that 'an escalation into a violent confrontation seemed inevitable' (Fox, 1992a, p. 22).

After Wright's judgement, police, as members of a disciplined organisation, saw no alternative but to apply the law according to the judge's exposition and move against the picketers. The big police push on 4 June proved decisive. However, the level of violence was surprisingly low despite the numbers involved and the enmity of picketers and mill management. Despite the 4 June clashes, local Burnie police remained on good terms with the workers and there were no recriminations (*Mercury*, 10 June 1992).

Regional Burnie police rely heavily on the cooperation of the local people, especially in times of emergency. Although the industrial dispute was settled, the policing responsibilities in the area continued unabated. The police were attempting to keep the peace not just between company and picketers but also within the regional community. To community police practitioners, the APPM unionists were fellow residents of Burnie and surrounds; workers on strike, not criminals (Baker, 2005, p. 131). Like the APPM workers, Burnie police strongly identified with the district and formed part of that entrenched community. After the dispute was settled, local police remained in north-west Tasmania; the workers did too; but nine months afterwards North Broken Hill-Peko sold the plant to Amcor. Labour, including that of police and mill-workers in a particular region, is far less mobile than capital in terms of employment, family, home, education, social and recreational links (Ellem, 1999).

Historically, police were not reticent to use coercive power in industrial confrontations. The 1992 Burnie policing approach followed an alternative path: one that had been employed elsewhere as well; one of consultation and compromise rather than coercion; one that is much more conducive to the community functioning of police (Baker, 2005). The 1998 national waterfront dispute revealed the effectiveness of community protest and the desirability of negotiation and protocol between the union movement and police in order to maintain peaceful protest (Baker, 1999). The non-confrontational and non-interventionist policing of the wharves was welcomed by the Maritime Union of Australia and its supporters and was drastically different from much traditional aggressive policing of industrial disputation and more in keeping with the peacekeeping function of Burnie police in 1992 (Baker, 2005). From the 1990s onwards, police leadership in Australia generally has been advocating communication, negotiated management and a less coercive approach to large-scale protests. Historically, superior numbers were the key to police victory, but today negotiation, information gathering, intelligence, surveillance and ultimately the psychological threat of

force and riot technology deployment are the tools of police dominance of potential public disorders in such mega events as the 2007 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit and the 2014 G20 event (Baker, 2008; Baker, Stenning & Bronitt, 2017).

Policing remote climate change protest

Rural and remote areas of Australia have experienced various environmental and climate change protests in recent decades. Some notable protest achievements include the 1982 Franklin River Dam blockade (Tasmania), the 1980s Roxby Downs protests against uranium projects (South Australia), the 1983 Daintree Rainforest blockade (Queensland) and the 1998 Jabiluka blockade opposing a uranium mine on traditional land (Northern Territory). Dissent is becoming more fractured with many single issue protests attracting a diverse array of participants in rural localities. Today, we have farmers at anti-fracking protests alongside environmentalists challenging coal-seam gas exploration. The local single-issue protest has become a more expansive concept in RRR areas (for instance opposition to fracking, steeple-jump racing, live animal exports, the meat industry, logging and coal seam gas mining).

Sporadically in Australia, eco-activists aligned to the radical Real Action on Climate Change, targeted remote power installations. In September 2008, activists shut down production at Loy Yang in the Latrobe Valley in Victoria for five hours (Doherty, 2009). Figure 2 depicts the location of the Latrobe Valley within Victoria; Figure 3 major towns and coal-powered stations as at 2009. In November 2008, environmental activists breached perimeter fencing at the Hazelwood plant, also in the Latrobe Valley. Activists gained entry into the site by simply climbing perimeter fencing. Two protesters, who fixed themselves to a rising coal conveyor, claimed that they did not encounter any security or plant personnel until they had locked themselves to the coal conveyor. Local Morwell police regarded the actions as unwelcomed, but the protest was peaceful.

Figure 2: Map of Victoria identifying location of Hazelwood in the Latrobe Valley⁶

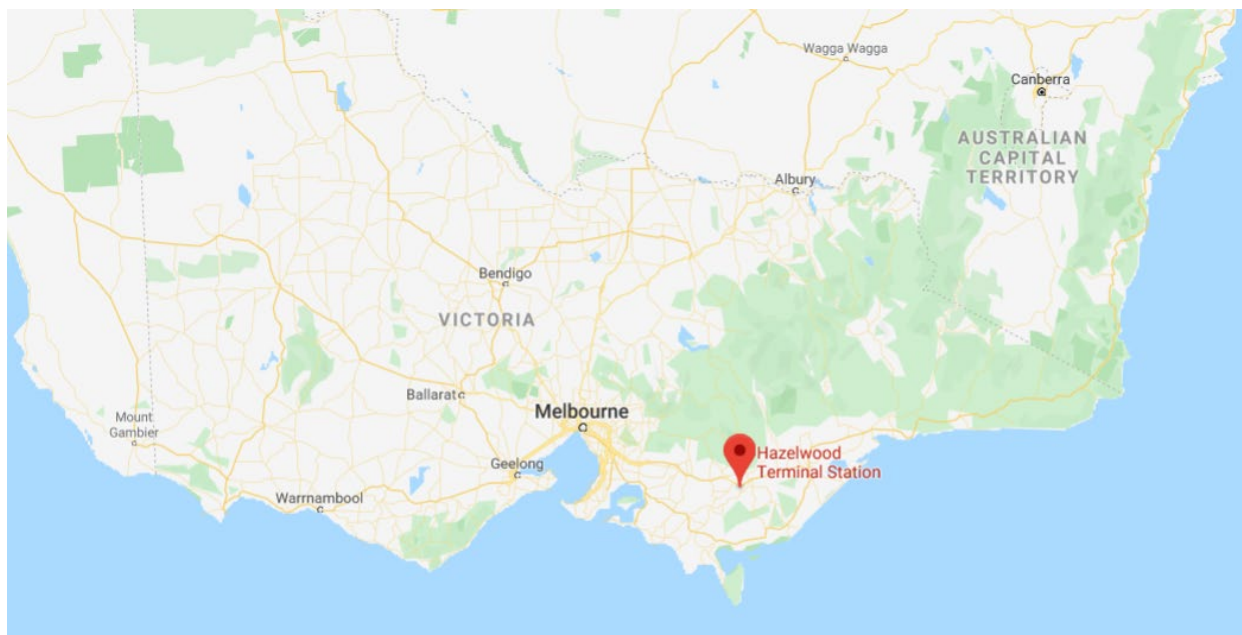
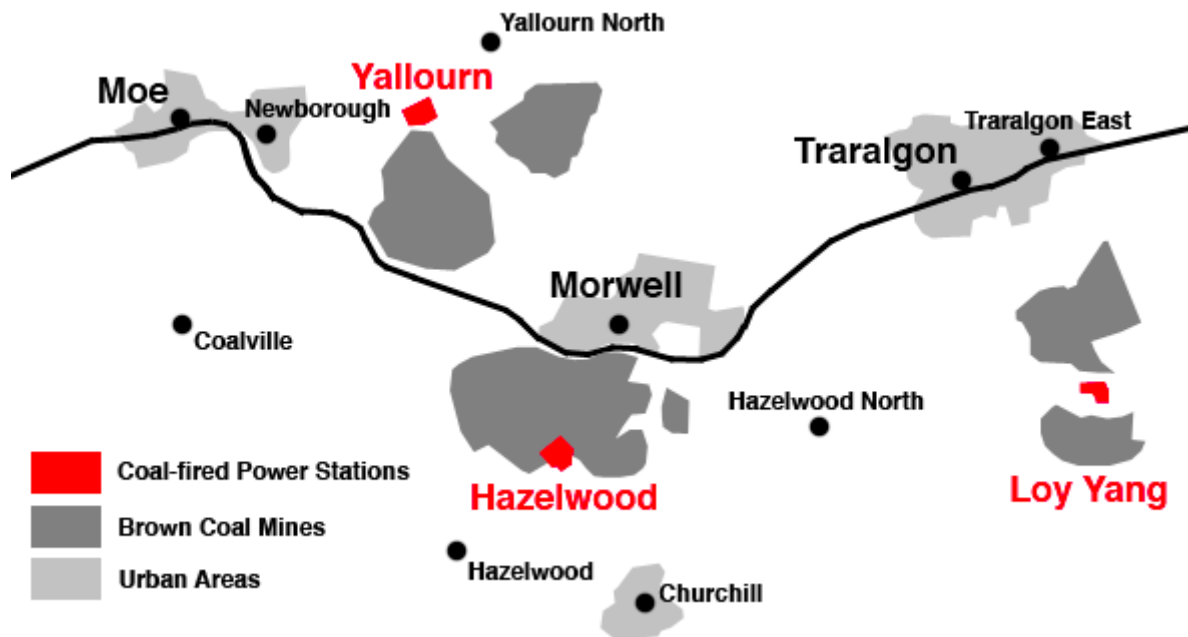


Figure 3: A map of the major towns and coal-fired power stations in the LaTrobe Valley, Gippsland, Victoria, Australia⁷



The ease of entry by eco-environmentalists in these instances highlights the issue of security at Australian power plants. What would happen if a number of power plants in remote regions were assailed on the same day? If potential fears of terrorist actions galvanise police and power companies to action during peaks of protest, one must ask how these power stations (many in remote locations) are protected when the public police are not present during the rest of the year. Are power institutions more vulnerable to sabotage on days when protest is not occurring?

The policing of environmental protests, rallies and camps, often in RRR areas, challenges police to facilitate such protests but also maintain control and order. Climate change protest stems from eclectic, amorphous, diffuse and fragmented gatherings that are comprised of various affinity groups, cell-like structures. As climate change activists challenge government and powerful energy corporations, it is inevitable that threatened direct action will precipitate police intervention (Baker, 2011). One such example was the September 2009 protest against the Hazelwood coal-fuelled power station in the Latrobe Valley.

Victoria's largest power station, Hazelwood was opened in 1964, condemned for closure in 2009, but the state government offered it a reprieve until 2031. (It was closed in March 2017, a decision instigated by its biggest shareholder, the French Government). The plant, a major employer of 900 people in the region, was regarded as one of the worst polluters in the Southern Hemisphere. It was situated in an isolated part of the state; the nearest township is Churchill with population of approximately 4,900 people (not the normal type of venue for symbolic protest). Hazelwood Power Station had a 36 kilometre fence-line and normally only two people patrolled it at night. The plant exhibited limited external security and little traffic normally passed the remote location. The regional newspaper, the *Latrobe Valley Express*, alleged that staff members had indicated that terrorists could "easily"

enter the plant at any time as it was completely defenceless, especially in thick fog (Ipsen, 2009).

Rural police will often lack the public order training and experience of city counterparts, but possess community insight and nous. Research findings from many countries indicate that police encounter special demands in rural communities due to large geographical distances, isolation and limited resources, although Lindstrom's study (2015) of Swedish rural residents indicated that they generally have higher level of confidence in local police. The limitations of rural police numbers and distant resources (compared to urban counterparts) and the difficulty in attaining reinforcements are issues of concern. Although Victoria Police followed state-wide regulations and procedures consistent with their established public order guidelines, the regional location of the Hazelwood Power Station posed challenges for police planning in terms of predictability, accessibility, numbers, resources and coordination.

The environmental activists' Climate Camp protest, self-labelled 'Switch off Hazelwood. Switch off Coal. Switch on Renewables', was staged on 12 and 13 September 2009. About 400 protesters participated in the main day of action on the Sunday when they marched to the power station. This protest was small by international standards and even by some remote Australian blockades demonstrations, such as anti-uranium and Save the Franklin protests, but 'Switch off Hazelwood' was significant by regional Victorian ones (*Latrobe Valley Express*, 7 September 2009). As the Hazelwood camp protest was a first-time happening for Victoria, both protest organisers and police had limited foreknowledge of the protest's potential numbers, composition, likely actions and outcomes.

Victorian law protects 'critical infrastructure' sites against threats of sabotage or terrorist activity, involving a maximum penalty of 25 years' jail (Ker, 2009). The law supports the protection of the assets and property of companies and corporations, and police are mandated to enforce the law. Victoria Police openly acknowledge that information is shared with companies, including in this Hazelwood case. Police liaison was not confined to the protest organisers, but also included "open dialogue with the operators to encourage them to do whatever they can to keep safety and security" (Taylor interview, 2009). Police advised that the company was responsible for its own assets and company security staff were aware of responsibilities and legal restraints stemming from licencing agreements and training requirements of the state. Police provided guidance on matters such as the use of force and the exercise of powers. The owner, British-owned International Power, erected a security fence around the perimeter of the Hazelwood plant aimed specifically at preventing any protester intrusion. This created a 'no man's land' around the site (Baker, 2010).

Victoria Police followed normal processes when dealing with the 'Switch-off Hazelwood' campaign: gathering of information, assessment of intelligence, contact and negotiation with protest organisers, yet they also planned for the 'worst case scenario'. Local police on-the-spot, who initially met potential protest organisers, assessed 'open source' information including websites, knowledge of similar protest activity and other undisclosed sources in order to establish intelligence that formed the risk assessment about the publicised upcoming Hazelwood event (Taylor interview, 2009). Although Hazelwood was remote and distant from Melbourne, the experiences of recent protest activities influenced Victoria Police planning: the G20 protests in November 2006 had created images of balaclava-clad rioters trashing part of Melbourne's central business district and the police planning for the 2007 Sydney APEC summit had starkly revealed the effectiveness of utilising both police-activist

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dialogue and the psychological impact of police weaponry (Baker, 2008). The on-going planning for Hazelwood included one police officer who was dedicated to the planning for seven weeks prior to this remote event.

Unlike Blackheath in south-east London in August 2009 – where the location of the week-long Camp for Climate Change could be kept secret until the actual morning of the camp's establishment – the location and timing of the Hazelwood protest was known for some months in advance (Baker, 2011). And unlike Blackheath when sudden 'swoops' of protesters descended on the site when activated by mobile phones and texts, the remoteness of Hazelwood (eight kilometres/five miles from the nearest train-station at Morwell) meant that the camp could only attract a protest crowd if people had sufficient time to organise transport (and possibly accommodation) to the Latrobe Valley. The fact that the remote Hazelwood location was known to all in advance meant that both police and protesters could liaise with some specificity prior to the event.

Police from the provincial town of Morwell claimed that they were initially "very forward in making contact" with various protest groups to "break down barriers" (Allen interview, 2008). On 15 October the previous year, during deliberations of the Victorian Legislative Assembly at the then Monash University Churchill campus, protests of small, vocal bands (anti-desal plant, anti-abortion and disgruntled ambulance drivers) were controlled by a low-key, local Churchill police presence led by Sergeant Peter Allen (interview, 2008), who stressed the impartiality of the police role to the groups: "Protesters understand that we are there to only do a job, we're not saying that we are against them or on their side". In preparation for the 2009 Hazelwood climate protest, dialogue was viewed as a means of making contact, meeting and swapping details in 'a friendly veneer' (Taylor interview, 2009). Dialogue initiatives create opportunities for negotiated arrangements that set parameters and expectations for crowd behaviour, limit surprises and establish some rapport.⁸ If violence is to be avoided during volatile and unpredictable police-protester encounters, much of the challenge lies in meaningful dialogue and constructive arrangements prior to the actual event as well as communication during and after that event (Baker, 2014).

Local Gippsland region Superintendent Neville Taylor (interview, 2009) stressed the importance of dialogue between police and protest organisers:

We encourage some really open and candid dialogue with the organisers of the protest so that we can facilitate protest in a way that we can maintain community safety. Part of that is the responsibility to prevent breaches of the law: that is, damage, injury to people, trespassing – three key areas.

The dialogue that occurred had much in common with urban protests, although on a more personalised level. The meetings of police and protester organisers involved typical ritualistic manoeuvring and probing of the other's strengths and weaknesses. Protest spokespeople viewed the first meeting between police (a constable from Morwell, a police community liaison person and a detective) as the typical "happy, shiny police liaison cop who does the friendly, friendly bit" (Morris interview, 2009a). Both sides were somewhat apprehensive of the other. Both saw electronic accountability as a two-way process, with both police and protesters having cameras to record the upcoming event. Police and protest organisers also had a long-term interest in developing rapport as further environmental protests were anticipated in the region. Although dialogue is not a panacea for all police-protester encounters as limitations are apparent and although some suspicion is inevitable, it

remains in the self-interest of both police and protesters to facilitate peaceful protest through dialogue, whenever feasible (Baker, 2014).

Climate Camp organiser Louise Morris described the intended protest as “a mish-mash of potentials”, uncertainties and hazards. Morris (interview, 2009a) compared the elusive negotiations as akin to:

... a smoke and mirrors chess game ... we’ve spoken to you, you’ve spoken to us, we’ve played friendly. On the day, how much of what you’ve committed to will you stand by? The same applies to our side.

Civil disobedience protests and protest rallies (for examples, the 2007 Walk against Warming and the 2009 Climate Summit in Canberra) are often peaceful and dignified, but global issue protests are more tenuous and unstructured for the organisers and their communities. Hazelwood presented an unprecedented challenge for police and protesters. As well, in a regional district, demonstrations can affect community safety by absorbing available police resources as they constitute “big distractions to us (police) in our normal service delivery to the community” (Taylor interview 2009).

Plans for Hazelwood included the deployment of police from outside the Latrobe Valley. This was ‘nothing unusual’ as Victoria Police, a single centralised state institution, has mobile resources that are utilised for public order events, whether they be coastal holiday population explosions in summer or potential festive crowd activities. Although in a remote area, the fact that the Hazelwood protest was public news for some weeks beforehand meant that police planning could follow risk assessment procedures.

Media reports estimated 250 police monitored the 400 to 500 protesters on Sunday 13 September. Due to the terrain surrounding the Hazelwood plant and its pondage, the police presence included foot police, police on trail-bikes and jet-skis, mounted police and members from air and water squads, supported by police helicopters. Criticism of the policing focused on the police numerical saturation and the extensive surveillance. Superintendent Taylor claimed that police had to be prepared for anything: the worst case scenario. Despite 22 arrests and some pushing and shoving at the fence-line, there were no major injuries. Police, determined to prevent any interruptions to Victorian power supplies, concluded that the operation had been successful because the more radical activists were unable to disrupt the power-plant operations (Taylor interview, 2009).

The protest liaison team claimed that police, on the Sunday morning, reneged on certain agreements.⁹ According to Morris (interview, 2009b), a local Morwell policewoman, who had been involved in the liaison meetings from the beginning, allegedly was visibly upset by the police hierarchy’s change of direction when the protesters’ media van and the public address (PA) system were refused entry. The PA system was needed for activist self-policing of the protest, “to direct and keep things safe and orderly”. The fact that police were prepared to make minor concessions in terms of the PA system and the entry of one car to act as a media van indicated some willingness, though reluctant, by police to listen to the protesters’ concerns and eventually abide by the previously agreed arrangements. However, police tactics did force a number of people, unaware of the ‘back’ roads, to trek eight kilometres (five miles) to the front of the Hazelwood plant (Morris interview, 2009b).

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Police command intended to reactivate the pragmatic dialogue “with the organisers of the protest, if it comes again” (Taylor interview, 2009). To what extent trust had developed between local police and the Hazelwood climate campers is a moot point; suspicion remained among the activists who experienced the weekend of protest. As environmental protests are regional, national and global, police realise that liaising and accommodating such climate change protesters is a long-term challenge and that other types of regional activism would emerge. For instance, in 2015 about 200 workers and unionists at the Maryvale paper-mill protested against Australia Paper which hired 75 specialist New Zealand maintenance workers (ABC News, 26 October 2015).

Reflections

In handling protest, police are expected to intervene and act legally and decisively, but fairly and proportionately. Ironically, police determination to win all public order battles, especially those with protesters, can lead to a loss of public sympathy and support. The regional dynamics of local communities (whether cohesive or divided), the composition of the police contingent, the police leadership and the mixture of the protesting groups impact upon the police-protester interaction. ‘Rural’ does not mean a monolithic stable community: the policing of both industrial Burnie and Morwell’s climate camp evoked fragmented local responses to the activism and the police responses.

Although the centralised state police agencies in Australia have set public order guidelines and although police officers receive some public order training, it is the police on-the-spot planning for protest in RRR localities who usually initiate contact with potential picketers or protest groups. Operational rural police, providing a generalist service compared to the more specialist urban roles, often live within the local community and adopt a community-based model of policing through which they become immersed and embedded into rural values and beliefs (Scott & Jobes, 2007, pp. 127-30).

Such community closeness and reliance poses a dilemma for police if protest erupts: the rural police officer may be sympathetic to the cause and personnel, but police are employed to enforce the law and belong to the central police authority that formulates operational guidelines and demands allegiance. The identity and standing of the local police leader in charge, the limitations of rural police numbers and resources, the difficulty in attaining reinforcements and a remote community’s propensity to support its aggrieved workers are crucial considerations in the police response to industrial and political strife.

RRR policing faces the challenges of broad geographical expanses, fewer resources, limited back-up and equipment, and more distant communication with senior officers at state police headquarters. Centralised police organisations have incorporated specialist police units; Victoria’s former Force Response Unit (now the Public Order Response Team) was designed to provide ‘a specialised industrial disputes and order maintenance capacity’; the urban-based New South Wales Public Order and Riot Squad was formed to initially handle protests against the 2007 Sydney APEC summit (Baker, 2005; 2008). Regional centres do not possess such units to control pickets or protest, but must rely on assistance from the capital city during emergencies.

Policing of RRR protest is not devoid of complexity. Policing of dissent should be viewed not just in terms of the particular dispute or cause, but also as a component of the on-going policing of the district. Protests in remote areas can still attract an amalgam of disparate

social, class and political groupings, and thus local sympathies are more problematic, diversified and sometimes divided (for example, anti-logging and pro-logging sympathies can divide a small community). Protests against Santos' coal seam gas drilling exploration in the Pillaga have seen strange bedfellows of protesting environmentalists and local farmers demanding a ban on coal seam gas in New South Wales (Foley, 2014).

A tension regularly apparent in rural/regional public order situations involves centralised, state-directed policing and local norms of police-community relations. In many situations, local police, immersed in the community, are better placed than 'outsiders', but there are circumstances when an 'outside' and dispassionate force may be more appropriate to deal with aggrieved groups. Well-trained crowd control specialist police may have their place: for example, the quick and effective settling of tensions during the 1991 Camperdown meatworks dispute (Baker, 2005).

Regional and remote communities today potentially face many of the same fears that besiege their urban counterparts, ranging from the 'ice' epidemic to exposure to the rhetoric of potential global terrorist attacks. Victoria Police members have been officially advised that they constitute terrorist targets. Potential terrorist targets are perceived as applying mainly to urban infrastructure and symbolic locations, but terrorist assaults on the power plants of the Latrobe Valley could leave not just the Gippsland region, but the state highly vulnerable.

In April 2018, Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police Graham Ashton announced that police in rural Victoria would be armed with semi-automatic guns, stored in police stations, due to a growing concern about terrorism in country towns (though no specific threats were detailed). The Chief Commissioner indicated that such weapons would assist rural officers to better respond when 'police are turning up to farm properties in the middle of the night and we know the owners have access to long arms and we are at a significant disadvantage' (Colangelo 2018).¹⁰

The current rise of the so-called 'warrior cop' syndrome in some Western democracies has accompanied further 'tooling up' of specialist public order units. Calls to arm frontline police with military-style rifles include police in rural and regional areas (Goldsworthy 2018). The successes of dialogue policing and negotiated management of public order may be tested in an era where police are becoming more heavily armed not just in urban but also in rural locations. The challenge for police is how to make negotiation and other violence minimisation strategies effective when dealing with dissent of diverse agendas in diverse geographic locations.

Endnotes

¹ Coventry and Palmer (2008) argue that rural communities, especially marginalised Indigenous ones, have faced distinctive social harm and criminal justice issues. These authors contend that there has been a relative, though not absolute, absence of rural criminology.

² The Native Police Corps, consisting of Aboriginal troopers, was deployed in remote parts of the Port Phillip region where Aboriginal resistance to British occupation challenged the armed settlers. In 1843, battles occurred in remote Gippsland and Portland Bay in the western district. Fels's research (1988) of the Native Police Corps from 1837 to 1853, despite some attempts at co-operative policing between settlers and Aboriginal inhabitants in the Port Phillip District, indicates that the Corps was mainly seasonal and employed on the outskirts

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of white settlement. Violence occurred when the force tracked and captured Aboriginal wrongdoers, especially those for allegedly stealing sheep.

³ Wright was regarded as a conservative judge, the son of Liberal Party Senator Reg Wright.

⁴ Wright's Supreme Court judgement of the law enforcement role of police was at odds with some legal precedents. The catalyst for the Brixton race riots of April 1981 was 'Swamp 81', an intensive police operation of indiscriminate stop and search to counteract street crime and burglary. Although police were not responsible for the socio-economic depression and hopelessness, Lord Scarman, in accord with the sentiments of the 1967 Kerner Commission for American race riots, reported that rectification lay with police adjusting "their policies and operations so as to handle these difficulties with imagination as well as firmness" (Alderson, 1998, p. 127). The Scarman Inquiry (1981) was instrumental in changing British policing practices, including the evolution of the Association of Chief Police Officers' *Manual of Guidance for Public Order*.

⁵ Image sourced from Google Maps.

⁶ Image sourced from Google Maps.

⁷ Source: Nick Carter, June 2009,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latrobe_Valley#/media/File:LaTrobe_Valley_CFPS.png

⁸ Swedish Dialogue Police are arguably the exemplar of this approach. Dialogue initiatives create opportunities for negotiated arrangements that set parameters and expectations for crowd behaviour, limit surprises and establish some rapport. The Swedish Dialogue Police are specially trained officers, mostly tertiary-educated. They wear yellow vests amidst crowds but are linked and teamed with trained commanders, mobile units, plainclothes arrest officers and transport units. Dialogue Police, who initiate communication with protesters, use knowledge of protesters in order to reduce the risk of misunderstandings, foster tolerance of minor disruptions, and avoid unnecessary provocation – a pivotal peacekeeping tactic (Wahlstrom, 2007, pp. 391-393; Adang, 2012). They liaise with protesters to improve police-crowd relations via communication, facilitation and negotiating agreements; they set limits for protesters of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour; they interact as conduits between police commanders and demonstrators. The Swedish model places certain well-trained police amidst the demonstrating crowd, rather than at a distance anonymously locked and hidden inside vehicles or control rooms. Liaison between police and protest organisers sometimes adopts a ritualistic format as both sides seek information about intentions, numbers and tactics. Dialogue and negotiated management between police leaders and protest organisers has lessened the extent of aggressive and confrontational policing intervention through an emphasis on peacekeeping rather than rigid law enforcement (Baker, 2014). It has reduced the cost of controlling large-scale protests, limited the dangers to police and public and enhanced police legitimacy. Although most protest events in liberal democracies remain peaceful, Adang (2012) claims that most public order maintenance research only occurs after the event has taken place and hence is pre-occupied with confrontational situations.

⁹ Police do not always adhere to negotiated agreements with protest groups. Ericson and Doyle (1999) elicit how the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 1997 reneged on a negotiated accord with student protesters prior to the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation summit at the

University of British Columbia. Police, employing preventive arrests, censorship and violent dispersion, rejected protest rights of political expression in favour of ‘security concerns’. New Zealand witnessed its national police force renege on a series of arrangements with ‘Free Tibet’ protesters during Chinese President Jiang Zemin’s visit in September 1999. New Zealand Police, pressured by the Chinese delegation and the common knowledge that the New Zealand government desired an incident-free visit, aided Chinese officials by using buses and sirens to block chanting protesters and pro-Tibetan flags and placards from Zemin’s hearing and sight (Baker, 2007).

¹⁰ Solo patrols have been banned and police no longer work alone in Victoria without special permission. It has been argued that these rulings may threaten the viability of some country police stations and reduce station hours and service provision (Colangelo, 2018).

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